

The Impact of Development on the Heritage of Downtown St. John's

Prepared by Heritage NL 2019

Overview:

On May 4, Jerry Dick, Executive Director of Heritage NL led a Jane's Walk through downtown St. John's to a group of around 15 participants as part of a weekend of Jane's Walks around the city. The walk was meant to generate reflection by participants on the impacts of post-1960s development on the historic character of downtown and to stimulate a discussion about how we ensure a healthy, dynamic downtown that continues to draw both residents and visitors.

The Jane's Walks are named after Jane Jacobs who was a journalist, author and activist and one of the first and most articulate critics of post WW II urban renewal. The walks are held on the first weekend of May around the time of her birthday. Her most famous work was "The Death and Life of Great American Cities" in which she critiqued the post-WW II slum clearance and freeway building schemes in city centres across North America. After living in New York she relocated to Toronto in 1968 where she carried on her writing career. Two of her key concepts were "eyes on the streets" which was about having sufficient density, activity and visual access to a street to ensure its safety and the notion of "social capital" or those intangible human relationships and values that contribute to community health, something that the planners and engineers often failed to grasp. Her idea of maintaining

the health of a city was to maintain the diversity of its streets. In her words:

"To generate exuberant diversity in a city's streets and districts four conditions are indispensable:

1. The district, and indeed as many of its internal parts as possible, must serve more than one primary function; preferably more than two...

2. Most blocks must be short; that is, streets and opportunities to turn corners must be frequent.

3. The district must mingle buildings that vary in age and condition, including a good proportion of old ones so that they vary in the economic yield they must produce. This mingling must be fairly close-grained.

4. There must be a sufficiently dense concentration of people, for whatever purposes they may be there..."

"...there must be eyes upon the street, eyes belonging to those we might call the natural proprietors of the street. The buildings on a street equipped to handle strangers and to insure the safety of both residents and strangers, must be oriented to the street. They cannot turn their backs or blank sides on it and leave it blind... This order is all composed of

movement and change, and although it is life, not art, we may fancifully call it the art form of the city and liken it to the dance . . . in which the individual dancers and ensembles all have distinctive parts which miraculously reinforce each other and compose an orderly whole.”

Urban designer Jeff Speck reinforces these conditions with his 4 principles for walkable cities, “walkability” being a key concept in ensuring a dynamic cities and neighbourhoods:

- A Reason to Walk – a broad diversity of functions within a fairly dense area to attract people
- A Safe Walk - ensuring sufficient separation from vehicular traffic or slowing it down sufficiently so that pedestrians feel safe and lots of people in the streets.
- A comfortable walk – a space needs to be psychologically comfortable to walk in that allows pedestrians to see what is around them while providing a sufficient sense of enclosure
- An interesting walk – sufficient visual interest at the ground level of a street with active ground floors (shops, services, windows to look into and out of buildings).

Jacobs’ observations were used as a lens for participants in this Jane’s Walk to consider the impacts of development on downtown St. John’s over the last decades and going forward.

Background on Downtown Development and Impacts:

Historic Downtown Streetscapes

Prior to the 1960s downtown St. John’s comprised an extensive commercial area of storefronts, merchant premises, and industrial buildings that reflected a largely intact streetscape dating from the 19th and early 20th centuries. It formed a continuous commercial district on Water Street from Temperance Street in the East to Victoria Park in the West, all along Duckworth Street, and the west end of Gower Street, extending up into some of the residential streets on the west end.

The commercial core of St. John’s that many of us know and love developed in an organic way without any zoning regulations and little in the way of formal regulation, save edicts from the Colonial Government after fires requiring non-combustible materials and fire breaks or on the need for sanitary and water services.

Historic downtown St. John’s is characterized by a number of things:

- The gentle, undulating curves of Water Street that followed the old harbour shoreline.



- The strong patterning of buildings with heights of two to three storeys and fairly consistent window patterning. There was a unity of materials (brick and stone) which gave a fine texture to the street and provided a sense of permanence. The whole of downtown, including the old residential streets, have a pleasing architectural pattern with variations on a theme. The reason we have this unity is largely because of the building technology that was available in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Aside from wood, brick and stone were pretty much the only available building materials. Building heights were limited by the vertical distance that people and goods could realistically be transported to upper floors by human power. Initially roofs of wood or slate shingles needed

to be steep to properly shed water; only in the late 19th century did flat or low-sloped roofs become possible with the introduction of bitumen-based products like felt and tar. Window configurations and sizes were determined by the standard-sized glass generally available that resulted in typical 6/6 windows in the 19th century and 2/2 or 1/1 windows in the 20th century with large plate glass reserved for shop windows.

- There were numerous side streets and laneways that served to break the main downtown commercial streets into smaller blocks
- The commercial buildings of downtown were interspersed here and there with the occasional public edifice of a larger scale but these were all built of the same materials and generally followed the same classical architectural vocabulary.



Former Post Office, Water St.

Post-1960s Development Brings Change

A number of developments, beginning with the creation of Harbour Drive and the construction of the Pitt's Memorial viaduct, had a major impact on the historic commercial district resulting, over the next decades, in the demolition of more than half of St. John's historic commercial structures. The major focus seemed to be – as with cities all across North America – on moving traffic through the downtown as efficiently as possible. Changes included:

1) The elimination of the old finger piers on the harbour and their replacement with Harbour Drive saw a change in character of the water front from a fine-grained, irregular texture of jutting piers and public coves to a continuous, straight harbour apron. This opened up the backs of Water Street buildings with a new public street, Harbour Drive, designed to speed up vehicular traffic moving through downtown. The area adjacent to Harbour Drive was almost exclusively devoted to parking.



2) The construction of the container port saw the elimination of all the 19th century commercial buildings on the south side of Water Street from Waldegrave Street up to the former Train Station.

3) The building of the Pitt's Memorial Viaduct and the creation of New Gower Street resulted in the elimination of a significant number of 19th and early 20th century commercial buildings on Gower Street and the streets leading up from it. It also served to cut off the pedestrian access from the central downtown area to the West End of Water Street with the viaduct and an extension to Hamilton Ave.



4) The construction of Atlantic Place saw the demolition of a half block of post-1892 Fire commercial buildings and the construction of a large, multi-storied commercial/office building and parking garage. This, by the way, was one of the key events that lead to the heritage preservation movement in

the city. This had been preceded by the original Fortis tower and was followed by other bank towers including the TD the Scotia towers, along with other smaller commercial developments. Most of the north side of Harbour Drive has been developed either for parking lots or parking garages.



Above: The Ayre's department store which was demolished to make way for Atlantic Pace (below)

5) More recently the city made the decision to create a high rise zone at the west end of downtown. This has had the benefit of keeping recent high rise development away from the old historic heart of downtown. That being said, good design principles that make the rest of downtown a good place to be have not been applied, particularly when it comes to maintaining pedestrian-friendly streets. Much of the new development in this area either presents blank walls and parking garages on all but one street address or offers suburban-set backs surrounded by parking lots (e.g., the new Fortis Building).

Due to the availability of new technologies and materials, many of the newer developments have been constructed at a scale completely different from the existing building fabric of downtown. The intimate scale of downtown, defined by standard building widths of a few bays, shop fronts on the street, and short blocks began to be replaced with new structures that often took up a major section of a city block and that extended several stories higher than existing structures. Larger edifices can be visually broken down to a finer scale that conforms to existing building typologies. As well, little consideration seems have been given to climate in the design of the new high rise towers which have a tendency to amplify the already windy conditions of the city and make it less comfortable for pedestrians.

Of particular note is the fact that many of the newer developments, particularly those situated on corner lots, offer only blank facades to side streets adding no visual interest for pedestrians. Add to this the fact that properties along

Harbour Drive are comprised of either parking garages or parking lots, and we have long stretches of downtown that don't support walkability. It is interesting to contrast these newer developments with the few remaining older side streets leading to the harbour such as the east side of Baird's Cove and the west side of Bishop's Cove that offer shops and services.

The opportunity to develop a lively rejuvenated harbour front with shops, restaurants and accommodations, parks and other amenities – something found in cities such as Halifax, Montreal and Vancouver – has been largely missed in St. John's. The lack of a long-term plan for the harbour front and existing regulations which actually discourage amenities at the street level (i.e., by requiring parking) means that the harbour front is becoming less and less a place where the public might want to go.



Status of Historic Commercial Buildings in Downtown St. John's since 1960

This map of Downtown St. John's shows the extent of historic commercial buildings that have been lost since the 1960s (black) along with those currently under threat of due to current zoning or long-term vacancy (red). Note that the remaining heritage buildings (green) are becoming increasingly fragmented (developed by Heritage NL, 2019).

Recommendations for Good New Development in Historic Districts/Neighbourhoods

1. New development in a historic district is best when it is not derivative or when it provides a false sense of history. It is best when it is of this time and of this place.
2. New development needs to respect and acknowledge the historic building fabric in terms of human scale, quality of materials, level of detailing, and what it offers to the street in terms of interest to passersby. It should also respect the traditional street pattern which often comprised short blocks reinforcing Jacobs' principle about short blocks. Failure to consider these things, further degrades the character of a heritage district and relegates what remains to the role of relic. Take for example, the Newman Building and the Newman Wine Vaults, two significant heritage structures which are, increasingly, being cut off from the rest of downtown through new development. A good practice would be to have proponents for new developments submit an analysis of their site (e.g., cultural, historical, climatic/environmental context and analysis of the way people use a neighbourhood) and to demonstrate how their proposals addressed these things. Understanding and responding to site is one of the key principles of good building design. Good design matters a lot in maintaining the integrity of the historic downtown core of St. John's. Solid design principles need to be articulated and enforced.
3. Drawing on Jacobs, all development must offer something to the street in terms of services and interest to pedestrians.

This means no blank facades which create a hostile environment for the pedestrian. North America is littered with cities and towns that have driven out pedestrians with new development and thereby made virtual wastelands out of their city centres. Good development can strengthen a city centre. Poor development can kill it.

4. Public and stakeholder consultation is key to ensuring good development. While properties may belong to private interests, the street belongs to and impacts everyone and citizens should have a say in how it is shaped. It is important to involve the public early in the design process for new developments. Typically, proposals come for public input very late in the design process when property developers have already invested significantly in their concepts and are very invested in them. When the public is finally consulted, their input is often ignored which only creates public cynicism and a sense that municipal officials are more aligned with the interests of developers. Whether it is through public design charrettes or community meetings, public input is best early on when a project is still in its formative stages. The public and stakeholder groups can provide ideas for how a development can benefit the entire community and not just the developer. What is good for the public is likely good for property owners as well over the long term. The recent submission for an annex to the Anglican Church Cathedral is a case in point. Early public/stakeholder input could have helped shape the way the diocese met their needs in a way that would garner a high level of public acceptance.

5. Long-term Sustainability – most of the pre-World War II buildings in the historic core of St. John’s were built of quality materials that, with ongoing maintenance, will survive centuries and they have generally aged to a pleasing patina. Many of our contemporary buildings are made of poor quality materials that require complete replacement or major upgrades every couple of decades. This is not good for the environment.

6. Cars and Heritage Districts – there is a need to re-evaluate policies related to how cars are accommodated in the historic core. Building ever more parking garages is likely not the solution. The decades-long trend of trying to bring more cars downtown has resulted in the loss of the majority of the city’s historic building fabric and has rendered long stretches of downtown unfriendly to pedestrians. Placing a greater emphasis on accommodating pedestrians will likely do more to enliven downtown core along with a strategy for enhancing public transportation to get people to and from the downtown area.

7.

Appendix I: Observations & Recommendations for the City for a Healthy Downtown (based on a participant discussion at the end of the Jane's Walk)

- Ensure that the downtown supports a good mix of functions and activities and that supports public life. No development should be allowed that doesn't offer something to the street and the pedestrian in the way of visual interest, windows to the street
 - Need to support more green space
 - Need to rethink some of the semi-public spaces that exist (e.g., bank plazas) that don't seem to support much public activity or use. Those that exist could be made more visually appealing and could be animated (e.g., pop-up food fairs; craft fairs; entertainment). A good example of this is the wide pedestrian passageway between Water Street and the west side of the Scotia Building (Ayre's Cove) that leads to a seating area overlooking the harbour. Most people aren't even aware that it exists.
 - Development should respect the historic character of the downtown.
 - Developers should be required in their proposals to demonstrate public benefit (for all strata of the community)
 - We must ensure the walkability of downtown in terms of:
 - Safety
 - Outdoor seating areas
 - Accessibility
- Aesthetics – good lighting and quality landscaping
 - Enhancement and maximizing of views
 - Shelter from the wind and rain
 - Visual interest
 - Windows on the street
 - Encourage sidewalk patios
 - Celebrate the existing laneways and alleyways downtown with art/greenery/naming
 - Animate downtown with festivals and special activities all through the year (e.g., art walks, historical tours, etc.).



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